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The Public Library in Its Community:

Governance and Funding

By Barbara McDade

One of the joys of public libraries is their uniqueness. Each is different, since each reflects its community. It has been said that if you want to find out what a community values, check out its library. The distinction between public libraries begins at the governing level. Some libraries are run by boards of directors or trustees. These boards may be administrative or advisory. Administrative boards appoint the library director, oversee the operating budget, and make policies for library operations. Advisory boards make recommendations to local authorities for personnel, budget, and policies. The board members may be elected, may be appointed by the town or city governing body, may be appointed by another organization, may be self-perpetuating, or may be a combination of any of the above. There are also public libraries in Maine that have no library board, but are departments of town government (although some libraries are town departments, but have library boards). Boards may also own the building and the collection or own only the building or only the collection. Some libraries are private libraries that contract to serve a locality. Some are run by a locality, but have contracts to serve residents from other communities. Some public libraries in Maine are located in schools, but have distinct staff and collections to serve the public from those that serve its students.

In Maine, geography doesn't seem to matter. The Bangor Public Library is a 501(c)3 organization with

a library board that consists of nine members. Four of those members are appointed by the city council for six-year terms; four are the officers of the Bangor Mechanic Association, the organization that founded the library in 1828. The ninth member is the chief financial officer of the city. This arrangement comes from an agreement in 1889 when the city wanted to begin public library service to its residents. Upriver in Old Town, the public library is a city department with no library board. Downriver from Bangor, the Edythe Dyer Library in Hampden is a city department with an advisory board. In the town of Hermon, the school library is open for the public to use after school hours.

Of the 269 public libraries listed on the Maine State Library's web site, 112, or 41 percent, are listed as city or town departments. That leaves 59 percent of the public libraries in Maine that are not under the direct supervision of the local municipal authority.

Funding of local libraries also differs across the state. The percent of the operating budget coming from the local municipality can range from 26 percent in Stockton Springs (where the public donates bottles for recycling to fund the library) to 100 percent from municipal funding for the public library in Yarmouth. For the larger libraries in the state, Bangor receives around 61 percent of its operating budget from the city; the library in Brunswick, 83 percent; libraries in Portland and Auburn, 85 percent; and the city library in Lewiston, 97 percent. Other sources of operating funds include income from endowment funds, annual fund drives, gifts from friends and other auxiliary groups, and grants.

Funding for public libraries is never an easy task. People tend to love libraries, but don't understand that it costs money to keep the doors open, current books on the shelves, popular e-resources available for the public, and a staff to keep everything in working order. Funding since 2008 has been even harder, as endowment funds shrank and municipal funding grew tighter. In 2013, Governor LePage proposed having more services be paid for by local municipalities. This prompted the following remarks from Rockland City Manager, James L. Smith in a weekly report to the city council as published in the *Courier-Gazette* January 15, 2013:

this is really a tax shift that would place an additional burden of \$1,114,000 on the property taxpayers in Rockland.” He said to maintain present city services under this proposal, it would mean \$215 in increased property taxes to anyone owning a home assessed at \$150,000. That would just be to cover the municipal budget, not taking into consideration any increases in school or county funding, he said Jan. 15. To cut city services to offset the cost increase would mean eliminating multiple entire departments – the library, assessment department, fish pier and legal department, he said. “That’s not cutting fat,” Smith told the city council. “That’s cutting lean muscle.”

There are those who do not see public libraries as an essential service, but that is short-sighted. Public libraries are the heart of any community. The library is a service for everyone in town, from cradle to grave, that engages the community in conversations not only with those here and now, but with past generations and generations to come. 🐟



Barbara McDade has been director of the Bangor Public Library since 1991. Previously, she was director of public libraries in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New Jersey. She is the chair of the Maine Library Association legislative

committee and the ALA chapter councilor for Maine.